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The Short Short

Upon My Soul / by Jack Ritchie

Life is hell," Merton said. Not quite, I thought, but I nodded. "She's absolutely the most beautiful girl in the world," Merton said. "Perfect in every detail."

I hadn't been too well briefed when I took the assignment to negotiate for his soul. "How old are you?"

Merton sipped his martini. "Twenty-one."

"And her name is Diana?"

Merton peered at me. "How did you know?"

"You must have mentioned it," I said.

"How come I'm telling you all this?"

"Every man needs to talk sometime," I said. "Now your problem seems to be that you are infatuated . . . in love with this Diana and she apparently doesn't know that you exist?"

"A goddess," Merton said. "A divine goddess."

"Yes," I said. "But you have a keen desire to bring her down to earth, so to speak. Perhaps I can help you."

Merton had consumed three martinis, and I thought that he was sufficiently insulated to withstand any shock.

"Merton," I said, "I'll come directly to the point. I am here to purchase your soul. And in exchange for this, I will grant you 20 years of supreme bliss with Diana."

His eyes were a bit bleary as he stared at me. Then he chuckled. "You're kidding."

"No," I said. "I'm not kidding."

He leaned closer. "I don't see any horns."

"Very well," I said, "if you insist." I waited until the bartender looked the other way and then produced a pair. I withdrew them after a moment. Merton paled.

"I'll be damned," he said. Naturally, I hoped so. He seemed considerably more sober. Then he said, "I'm five-foot-three and 130 pounds. What can you do about that?"

"How does six-foot-two strike you? And about 190?"

"I'm nearsighted and have a touch of astigmatism."

"That will be corrected," I took some papers out of my briefcase. "You may read the fine print. I have nothing to hide." Merton ordered another martini. I waited until he finished reading and then said, "Sign here where I've marked an X in pencil. The original and three carbons, please."

"Now hold it," Merton said. "You're giving me 20 years of happiness on earth and in exchange for this, I go to hell? For eons and eons? Forever?"

"It doesn't seem so long," I said, "if you keep busy."

He shook his head. "Twenty years is but an instant of time. It is so infinitesimally small that it cannot be measured as a proportion of eternity."

"How about 30 years?" I asked.

"No. The same principle holds whether it's 30 or a billion. Eventually it'll pass and leave not even a dimple on the cheek of time." No question about it, people are getting more sophisticated every day. Merton sipped his drink. "I prefer to sweat it out on earth and meet Diana in Heaven."

I smiled. "In the first place, what assurance do you have that you will reach Heaven under any circumstances? Not to mention Diana's chances. According to our projection at headquarters, Diana appears headed straight for . . ."

Merton interrupted me. "How long have you been in this business?"

"Longer than I care to think."

"And you've made a success of it?"

"My batting average is rather high," I admitted modestly.

"When the time comes to pick up a person's soul, does he ever welsh?"

"We do not accept welshing," I said. "A bargain is a bargain. But you would be surprised the lengths people go to. Some of them even hire lawyers."

"But do they ever beat you out of the deal?"

"Well," I said, "there have been a few cases."

"On what grounds?"

"Repentance and remorse. However, if you'll look at paragraph 16c in the contract, you'll notice that repentance and remorse are no longer considered valid excuses."

He was thoughtful. "I once heard Diana say she was on a diet. You don't suppose as the years go by she'll . . ."

"I guarantee that she will not gain an ounce."

"She comes from the Bronx," Merton said.

"I will see that she acquires a Virginia accent. It's quite popular these days." I pushed my pen closer to him.

He stared at it. "If I'm going to be six-foot-two and 190, it seems to me that spending 20 years with the same woman is one hell of a long time. Even if it is Diana."

"Ah," I said. "You are a shrewd bargainer, a man of the world. It is a pleasure to do business with you. Suppose I arrange that a new woman enters your intimate life every year? Do you prefer blondes? Brunettes? Redheads?"

"Mix 'em up," Merton said. His fingers touched the pen. "Did you ever notice that women talk too much? I mean all women?"

"Sorry," I said, "some things even I can't change."

He picked up the pen. "If I sign this, I see it binds me completely. And what about you? Does it bind you?"

"Naturally," I said. "Once I have your four signatures, the agreement becomes ironclad. There is nothing I can do to change it. My hands are tied."

He smiled and swiftly signed.

I retrieved and put the contracts in my briefcase. "Now to keep my part of the bargain." I waved my hand and gave Merton 60 pounds and an additional 11 inches in height. I also saw to it that his clothes and shoes fit properly.

He stood up and looked at the bar mirror. Merton was pleased. Quite pleased. He looked down at me and grinned. "Of course, you realize that when I signed that contract, I was under the influence of alcohol?"

I blinked. "Now see here, we both entered into this agreement in good faith."

He picked up the martini glass. "The bartender really shouldn't be serving me these. I won't be 21 until next month. That makes me a minor."

He downed the martini and walked toward the door. "See you in 20 years. At the trial."

I watched him go. He probably would get Daniel Webster to defend him, too.

Gerald, my district supervisor, appeared beside me. He frowned. "Henry, it looks like you've failed again."

"People keep outsmarting me," I said. "I never claimed I was a brain. Besides, I hit a run of bad luck."

He smiled significantly. "Really? Is that all it is?"

"Of course."

"We've been keeping an eye on you lately, Henry," he said. "We feel that—perhaps subconsciously—you aren't doing the best you can."

"But that's not true," I said. "I've signed up 21 clients since I joined the firm."

He nodded. "But every one of them managed to weasel out somehow when his time came."

"That's not my fault," I said defensively. "You simply ought to write tighter contracts."

He studied me. "Henry, we try to run an unhappy ship. You don't fit in. I'm afraid we'll have to let you go."

I stared at him. "Go? But what about my seniority?"

"I'm sorry," Gerald said. "You'll get your official pink slip in the mail."

When he was gone, I tried to raise my horns. I didn't have any. I was an ordinary human being again. I grinned. Yes, Gerald, there are more ways than one to skin a cat. Ω